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Alexus Chavana
Miami University - Oxford

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Alexus Chavana
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Performing Afro-Mexican Identity: the Racial Politics of *Negrito* and Devil Dances

Today, relatively few Mexicans identify as black in comparison to other Latin American countries. There even seems to be an effort to disown or deny the existence of Afro-Mexicans in the census data. 2020 will be the first national census to list Black as an option.¹ One way to understand how race is constructed in a society is to examine how it is performed. Theatrical performances featuring black characters portrayed by actors in some form of “black-face” have been common and even popular throughout the Americas. Through the historical contexts of public masked performances, we can begin to understand the delicate racial dynamics of contemporary Mexico.

I argue there is an important link between the performance of the Afro-Mexican identities through *Negrito*/Blackman and Devil masks and the willingness of Mexicans to self identify as black. There are many factors that go into any given racial identity and a complex history of slavery and miscegenation that contribute to the political and social climate around the Afro-Mexican identity. However through these fiesta masks we can easily compare and contrast how this identity is performed today, from both an insiders and an outsiders perspective.

Negrito masks, also called Blackman masks, depict a Black/African character within a performance. Without adhering to any particular, unifying style, *negrito* masks

¹ Krithika Varagur. “Mexico Finally Recognized Its Black Citizens, But That's Just The Beginning.” The Huffington Post, 27 Jan. 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mexico-finally-recognized-its-black-citizens-but-thats-just-the-beginning_us_568d2d9ce4b0c8beacf50f6b.

exist in a variety of shapes and sizes. The diversity of these masks is largely due to regional preferences. However, the masks are always painted black and many depict stereotypical African phenotypes. Portrayals of Black and African characters are typically informed by the outside perceptions of neighboring Afro-Mexican communities and typically not performed by a person who identifies as Black. Sometimes *negrito* performances are playing out local histories and stories involving Afro-Mexicans. Not all of these performances paint Black Mexicans in a negative light, however they all include an element that imply they are foreign in nationality.

Mesoamerica had already established a long and rich history of masking before Europeans occupied the area. Pre-Columbian Natives hosted many types of masquerades and spectacles before Spaniards invaded the region. When the Spanish, along with African explorers as well as slaves entered the region, traditions and aesthetics melded together and continued to evolve. Masks depicting Saints, Slaves and even Moors joined the cast of masked performances. At their core, *negrito* masks began a response to a new presence in ingenious communities. However, the depictions of Black people always remained separate from the national identity. The image of Blackness never quite assimilated, making the black identity foreign in origin.

The African presence in Mexico dates back as early as 1530, when Spanish conquistadores, accompanied by African explorers, following the Spanish conquest of the Moors, entered the region.² However, 2016 was the first time Mexican citizens had the option to identify as Black on a national survey. While there can be many contributing

² Anita González. "Indigenous Acts: Black and Native Performances in Mexico." *Radical History Review* No. 103 (Winter 2009): 133

factors to the number of Black Mexican citizens, the image of Afro-Mexicans is undoubtedly influences how individuals and families see themselves.

Las Castas paintings are among the first depictions of how early racial identities were formed and were understood. After Spanish colonies were established in what is now Mexico, *castas* were established to group and label different types of people of color. *Castas*, or castes created distinctions and divided individuals based on what percentage White, Black, and Indigenous they were. During this time there were many points of contact between the Indigenous, Europeans, and Africans. Some of these encounters were contentious, and others resulted in offspring, creating bicultural families and biracial children who made up the castes. The racial diversity became a bit of a novelty of the area, thus inspiring the *castas* paintings. Margarita de Orellana writes that the Spanish created these paintings with the ambition of grabbing hold of social and cultural control over the “other”.³ These paintings made not only made distinctions between the different combinations of race, but also stressed the association between race and behavior, social standing, occupation, and dress. These paintings include a mother, a father, and their child, often acting out different stereotypes of their race. These depictions tied race to preconceptions within the community, many of which also fuel the performances of the *negrito* dances.

³ Jacques Lafaye, Lorna Scott Fox, María José Rodilla, Charlotte Broad, Margarita De Orellana, Edward J. Sullivan, Teresa Castelló Yturbide, and John Page. "MEXICAN CASTAS PAINTING." *Artes De México*, Nueva Epoca, no. 8 (1990): 86



4.4 de Español y Negra Mulata (4 from a Spaniard and an African Woman, a Mulatto Girl), last quarter 18th c. Oil. 14 x 19 (36 x 48). Museo de America, Madrid.

Black people and Africans were the least desirable group to belong to, though in many cases those who were mixed also had their fair share of troubles.⁴ In the colonial days of New Spain, people of mixed race were often shunned equally by both communities often due to the idea of “purity of blood.”⁵ However, this changed during Mexico’s revolutionary period, while the social standing of Black Mexicans did not. The push to create a strong national identity emphasized the fusion of White and Indigenous

⁴ Phillips, Wendy E. "Representations of the Black Body in Mexican Visual Art: Evidence of an African Historical Presence or a Cultural Myth?" *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 5 (2009): 769

⁵ Jaques Lafaye, Lorna Scott Fox, María José Rodilla, Charlotte Broad, Margarita De Orellana, Edward J. Sullivan, Teresa Castelló Yturbide, and John Page. "Mexican Castas Paintings." *Artes De México*, Nueva Epoca, no. 8 (1990): 82

peoples, to unite the country. But, African roots were still secondary or left out completely from this narrative despite being an active participant in the nation's history since the times of Cortez.

Much of the contemporary Mexican fiesta traditions come from Spain, in which royalty and the church held dramas and dances in the streets, including conquest enactments and processions. This melded well with native traditions, which glorified the idea of the warrior and many parades.⁶ In colonial New Spain, a large part of fiesta masking and performances included the concept of *respeto*, or respectful restraint. As a result fiestas in many regions focus on a sense of order, place, and legitimacy.⁷

Negrito characters of Huamelula employ negative ideas about blackness. These characters are disruptive and violent, which speaks to existing perceptions of black people in the area. The characters are disorderly and overtly sexual. In some cases the *negritos* even wear bandanas, to allude to gang culture. However, not all of these performances imply a negative attitude towards Afro-Mexicans. The *Costeños* or *Pescaditos* dances tell stories about black characters that are brave fisherman and costal people who exemplify skill and valor against an alligator that are informed by neighboring Afro-Mexican communities. But, in both cases Blackness is reduced to being represented with phenotypes and stereotypes from an outside perspective that separates Afro-Mexicans from the National Identity.⁸ Often Blackness is associated with Cuban, Caribbean or South American roots.

⁶ Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 21

⁷ Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 45

⁸ Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 47



Huamelula, Oaxaca, 1991, Photo by George O. Jackson

Blackface as a performance is not unique to Mexico. Cuba also has similar performances that involve painting one's face black rather than using a mask. The fact that masks are used to depict Black people in Mexico while paint is used in Cuba could be interpreted as Mexicans as unwilling to contribute their own faces and thus identities when playing Black characters. It is yet another layer that separates Black Mexicans.

Examining masking in Afro-Mexican communities is no less complicated. Anita González writes, "Collectively, the archetypal masked dances push mythologies about African diaspora people to their limits. Public, in-your-face performances of black stereotypes seem both to rectify and to contradict expectations about who and what

blacks are.”⁹ Part of the reason why examining the perception of race through masking is that even among Afro-Mexican communities exhibit some of the archetypes of race constructed through stereotypes and perceptions of those outside the community and extenuate them.

Looking specifically at the Devil Dances of Costa Chica, we can see different “types” of Blackness play out. Afro-Mexican performance reflects the chaotic nature of African masquerade and use movements informed by African dance. These dances defy the concept of *respeto*. The movements can look violent or sexual for a visiting outsider, confirming and contributing to preconceived notions of blackness and performances of blackness.

The two main characters of these dances are Pancho, who is the main devil, and La Minga, his wife. There is speculation that the Devil Dances stem from the renouncement of the Christian god by Black slaves in the region. This theory postulates that due to the unjust treatment of Black people, Africans rejected their oppressors’ god and slaves rebelled by venerating the idea of the Devil with an African twist. As many African cultures don’t have the same concept of ultimate good and evil as Christianity, African deities often tend to be more plural. Likewise, in the Devil Dance, we see a more plural “devil” in Pancho.

⁹Anita González. “Indigenous Acts: Black and Native Performances in Mexico.” *Radical History Review* No. 103 (Winter 2009): 135.



La Boquilla, Oaxaca, 2005, Photo by JoséManuel Pellicer.

Pancho is typically represented in specific ways, as the rebel, the overseer, or as the rancher, or any combination of the three, depending on the area.¹⁰ Because Guerrero and Oaxaca have always been separated from the rest of Mexican society due to the mountainous region separating the two states from the rest of the country, this became a popular area for criminals and renegades to hide out. These states were a place for rebels to escape to. Here Pancho becomes a valiant resister. Meanwhile in other areas where Spaniards had put Africans in charge of Indigenous workers, Pancho becomes the cruel foremen. In communities where Africans had worked alongside the Native people, Pancho is more of a skilled rancher and ally.¹¹

La Minga is an embodiment of racial mixing and the anxieties it produced. Typically La Minga mask is red, black, or brown, portraying a black or mixed woman. In the context of the Devil Dance, the mask for La Minga typically has broad brown features and the performer (who is always a man) is padded to give the character a full bodied look to complete the image of a sensual *mulata*. Her character is hyper sexual and even violent at times, speaking to stereotypes about black and *mulata* women. A white baby, implying her indiscretions, sometimes accompanies her. This could stem from multiple historical references. For example, this could refer to La Malinche, a native woman who was Cortés' interpreter and mistress, who represents the betrayal of alliances and sleeping with the enemy.¹² Or La Minga and her illegitimate child could be referring to the large number of *mulata* women who had children with white men out of wedlock. Regardless,

¹⁰ Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 56

¹¹ Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 56

¹² Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 58

La Minga and her baby are demonstrations of the anxieties of racial mixing within the Afro-Mexican community.

The perceptions around these danced among outsiders to the community are particularly interesting. If asked, many of the non-Black locals of the Costa Chica region would say that the Devil Dance originated in South America, and was brought to Mexico by Black people. In reality, this is a custom created in Mexico by Afro-Mexicans. This demonstrates the misguided understanding that Afro-Mexicans aren't *really* from Mexico, keeping the Black identity distinctly separate from the National identity.

Ultimately, does the idea that *negrito* characters as “not from here” affect how people self identify? Do people reject African heritage in favor of feeling more Mexican? In her article “Indigenous Acts: Black and Native Performances in Mexico” for the Radical History Review, Anita González writes that Afro-Mexicans have “disappeared” into the *mestizaje* identity of Mexico. As I mentioned, depictions of Black Latinos, that create a sense of otherness between those with dark skin and the National Mexican identity isn't limited to masked performance. Stereotypes are perpetuated through other types of media as well. Memín Pinguín is a Mexican comic book character from the 1940's about a Black Cuban boy. Controversy surrounds this character because of the way he is illustrated and how it depicts Black people. The illustration emphasizes the same type of physiognomy that has been used in *castas* paintings as well as *negrito* masks, showing it to be a common thread throughout the culture. Nevertheless, Mexicans see Memín Pinguín as a cultural icon. Despite protests from Black Americans this character is now on an official stamp in 2005.

Today, Afro-Mexican communities are not recognized an indigenous ethnicity and thus don't get the same kind of benefits from the Government. These communities don't receive subsidies, land rights, political recognitions, or discrimination protections, even though some of these communities were established in the 17th century.¹³ It all comes down to the historical misunderstandings and false interpretations of African-Mexicans. Anita González writes, "In the Americas in particular, myths about blackness and black identity circulate because of the historical reality of disempowerment and enslavement of African peoples under colonialism."¹⁴ Ultimately, because of these myths, as seen through local masking practices, an environment is created that discourages Mexicans from embracing African heritage and suppresses its influence on the country.

¹³ Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 37

¹⁴ Anita González. *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010: 32

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